

Can Pan–Africanism in Zimbabwe Survive Mugabe?

Robert Mugabe built a Pan-African legacy through his rhetoric and policies. As Zimbabwe goes to the polls, Brooks Marmon explores what Pan-Africanism may look like in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe.

In November 1958, Robert Mugabe, then a schoolteacher in Ghana, wrote home to the African Daily News, to gleefully report that George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah's top adviser for Pan-African affairs, had categorically proclaimed that neither the white minority government of Southern Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe) or South Africa would be invited to the All-African People's Conference which would take place in Accra the following month.

In May 1960, Mugabe returned to Zimbabwe and quickly assumed a prominent position in the colony's burgeoning liberation struggle. Inspired by his experience in Ghana and fortified by his horror at the machinations of white Rhodesians to support the secession of Katanga from the Congo (Kinshasa) just weeks after his return, Mugabe's career as a nationalist politician was firmly rooted in the broader currents of Pan-Africanism that swept across Africa in the 1960s.

As head of state following independence in 1980, Mugabe's commitment to Pan-Africanism was equivocal. He presided over a [Namibia Solidarity Week](#) in 1981, but Harare never became the sort of nerve centre for activity against South Africa that Zambia or Mozambique had provided for Zimbabwe during the liberation struggle. Zimbabwe hosted the summit of the Non – Aligned Movement in 1986, but the pageantry of the British empire was in full force at the 1991 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held at Harare's Sheraton Hotel at a time when the country was moving to adopt structural adjustment policies recommended by international financial institutions.

However, Mugabe's political longevity, combined with his bold moves from 2000 onward to ostensibly redress colonial era injustices placed both his leadership and Zimbabwe in the militant Pan-African pantheon, albeit not without contention. Now that he has been removed from the political scene, will this legacy endure?

Mugabe moved more firmly into the Pan-African limelight following the launch of a land reform program in 2000 that appropriated vast tracts of land from approximately 4,000 white farmers. The manoeuvre was not without controversy, it was estimated that nearly half of the land went to political cronies of Mugabe. Pan-African academics have been split on Mugabe's legacy: Horace Campbell condemned '[the exhaustion of the patriarchal mode of liberation](#)' in a 2003 book, while Zizwe Poe, in an [interview](#) after Mugabe's resignation, proclaimed that despite some faults, the leader 'will be able to live as a hero like Nkrumah.'



President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe addresses the 70th UN General Assembly Image
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The ambiguity surrounding Mugabe's Pan-African legacy is reflected in the manner surrounding his departure from the political scene. Both [SADC](#) and the [AU](#) welcomed Mugabe's resignation while earnestly praising his Pan-African contributions. Mugabe had chaired both earlier in his seventh term of office, but they made no move to ensure that he was able to serve out his mandate and Mnangagwa was welcomed on a [whistle-stop tour](#) of SADC countries at the beginning of the year.

While ZANU – PF, Mugabe's party, continues to espouse its commitment to the philosophy of a revolutionary liberation party, its newfound appeasement of Western interests indicates a marked reversal from aspirations of militant Pan – African leadership.

Months after coming to power, Mugabe's successor and long-time deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, ventured to the World Economic Forum in Switzerland where he proclaimed Zimbabwe '[is open for business](#).' A neoliberal mantra has been the order of the day under the Mnangagwa administration, which in May applied to [re-join the Commonwealth](#).

In a sense, the move by Mnangagwa and the military to depose Mugabe represented a calculated repudiation of Mugabe's Pan– Africanism, however bogus. Both Saviour Kasukuwere and Patrick Zhuwao, key members of the G40 faction which favoured succession by Mugabe's wife, Grace, or one of her allies, had presided over Zimbabwe's indigenisation and economic empowerment programs, which within weeks of Mnangagwa's assumption of power were [greatly restricted](#).

While Zimbabwe's 'military assisted transition' was broadly welcomed by the international community, any full – fledged recognition of Mnangagwa's administration was bound to be determined by his ability to meet the terms of the West's good governance playbook, not Pan– African considerations. Given the economic deterioration over which Mugabe presided and the role of the armed forces in his removal, it seems unlikely that either ZANU – PF or the Zimbabwean public would have embraced a change of leadership that continued to uphold the more militant aspects of Mugabe's rhetoric.

It is possible that following elections on 30 July, Zimbabwe may tap into a more measured mantle of Pan-Africanism. The two main contenders, Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa, both hold potential in this regard.

Mnangagwa spent significant stints in Zambia and Mozambique during the liberation struggle and may be one of the last southern African leaders to have played a prominent role in the efforts to end minority rule from the beginning of the era of African decolonisation. Once assured of a democratic mandate after waiting behind Mugabe for decades, he theoretically has the motivation to re-position Zimbabwe's Pan– African legacy in a manner of his own making. Likewise, Chamisa, a youthful former minister of Information and Communication Technology could tap into the accelerating dynamism of African creative voices, and forge new links across the Continent.

Behind the efforts of either of these individuals however, Mugabe's contributions loom large. It seems unlikely that either will make such a profound mark on the continent, the former colonial powers, or the diaspora. Given Mugabe's notoriety however, that may be a patrimony that each will find acceptable.

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